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ABSTRACT

Before establishing alternative programs, administrators should investigate if the need is being generated by the incompetence or misuse of existing personnel, or if the existing program can be modified to fulfill the unmet needs. Alternative programs are ways of diversifying the means to common ends. Suggested ground rules for establishing alternative program in public schools are listed and examples given of what is being done within the regular secondary schools, in separate centers, and in the community. (MLF)

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ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

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Presentation at AASA Convention, February, 1976

Alternative Education, what is it? I am convinced that were I to survey this group, the number of definitions would equal the number of participants in this room today. If we, as professional educators, have difficulty nailing the proverbial jello to the wall when we discuss Alternative Education, imagine how our collective publics feel. I am reminded of the superintendent's instructions dealing with Haley's Comet.

(Haley's Comet Story - see attached)

Does this sound familiar? Now if you will, substitute the subject of Alternative Education for Haley's Comet.

What has led us to the current emphasis on Alternative Programs? This has become a fashionable item in recent years and many superintendents have regarded the development of successful Alternative Programs as a good investment in their own job security. It has come about in part because of increasing concern over dropouts, truancy, violence in the schools, graduates who can't read and write, declining scores on standardized tests, and culture clashes in the schools. At the same time, the schools have been called upon to stop requiring students to conform, and instead to develop programs which conform to the students. This is associated with such phenomena as students' rights policies, due process, right to privacy, bilingual education and anti-sex discrimination.

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Even the government accounting office is auditing a number of selected school districts to determine the relationship between truancy and discipline. The State of Virginia has created a special task force to establish closer relationships between juvenile courts and the public schools. We have seen attendance rates in the District of Columbia and many other cities drop to 75% and even lower. The 1970 Census reported nearly two million children ages 7 to 17 as not enrolled in school as of April of that year. The majority of these were in the age bracket 13 to 17. The Children's Defense Fund has reported several large school districts where from 13% to 15% of secondary students are suspended each year.

Obviously, we have large numbers of youngsters who are not succeeding in the programs that we are offering. Just as obviously, we need something different for these youngsters.

In this Bicentennial year, we are celebrating the ideal that all men are created equal and have equal rights to the good life, which includes education. After his declaration was adopted, Mr. Jefferson left Philadelphia and went back to Virginia to work on plans that would make the ideals of the declaration a reality. Among other things, he proposed a scheme for a system of free public grammar schools in Virginia, along with a great university. The University of Virginia was established before Jefferson's death but the system of grammar schools didn't come for another hundred years.

Throughout the country, the time lag between acceptance of the idea that free public education <u>should</u> be provided to all students and the actual fact of providing that service has been great. If high school

graduation is an indicator of the extent to which a free public education is provided, we still have a long way to go. The 1970 census figures show that forty per cent of the adult population had not completed high school.

To look at that figure positively, we can say that sixty per cent of the adult population had completed high school. Checking the 1960 census, we find that only forty-three per cent of adults had completed high school. The seventeen per cent increase in a decade shows real progress and suggests a perspective for our discussion of alternatives in education. While we have been talking about educating all the people for a lot of years, we are just now beginning to approach that goal. As we have gotten closer to reaching all the children, the need to offer alternative programs has become greater.

The children who receive public education in our early history were those whose families could afford to dress them and to send them off to school and placed a high priority on formal education. The programs established for these children in many cases continued through the years as "the regular program" for all students. Other events were occurring, however, that increased the number of children who were staying in school longer--or being kept there longer.

Some of these children fit "the regular program" and realized success. Others were rejected as misfits and failures. Sons and daughters of immigrants were also subjected to this educational process to determine who was "regular."

Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954 required that equal access to educational programs be granted to all children, and "the regular program" was strained beyond its limits. The humanistic approach of

the 1960's was to offer remedial and compensatory programs so that the children who were not "regulars" could catch up and be "regular."

The evidence of the last decade that "the regular program" could not stretch itself to meet the needs of all youngsters and that compensatory programs could not "shoe horn" in the youngsters that did not fit was too strong to overlook. High dropout rates, dissatisfaction on the part of students and parents, and low achievement further emphasized the fact. Psychologists and experienced teachers were telling us how children learn at different rates, with different learning styles, and with the need for different teaching styles. The differences in social and cultural backgrounds, interests, abilities, value systems and motivation were demanding attention. We could no longer say, "This is your school, like it or not--sit still or drop out."

The suggestion here is that alternative programs grew out of the need to educate all youngsters; not forgetting that the so-called "regular program" is still the best alternative for most kids. Too often, I believe, there are those who oversimplify the issue by suggesting that in "The good old days" children really <u>learned</u> their spelling and their arithmetic and their punctuation. And then some liberal educators came along who wanted to tear down the schoolhouse walls and set up a playhouse. Actually, the number of children who realized success in this regular program of the past was great but it was only a percentage of the total. Left out were the poor, the cultural wanderers, the learning disabled, the children who spoke another language, the gifted and talented and the undisciplined. Wasn't it Will Rogers who once said, "School ain't what they used to be and they never was."

Undoubtedly there are several forms of Alternative Education which are an absolute essential part of the program of studies of the successful school district. I refer to programs for the handicapped, programs for those with a vocational interest, programs for those requiring modified schedules combining the academic with on-the-job training and those providing activities which meet the special interest needs of students. These are necessary activities of the regular program which have been receiving our special attention from both a financial and personnel standpoint. As an example, special education, education for those with handicaps ranging from mild learning disabilities to the multiple handicapped, has expanded significantly in Fairfax County as in other districts. In 1972 we were serving 5,251 children with mild handicaps, supported by an annual budget of $4,246,856. New programs and services have been added rapidly so that we now serve 11,853 children, ages 2 through 21, with a wide range of handicaps, supported by annual budget of $15,358,224.

Vocational Education, a part of the curriculum for many years, has in the past been relegated to the rear of the building or a condemned school building with less than adequate financial support. I am pleased to report that dynamic and exciting programs are now surfacing across the country. In Fairfax County we are encouraged by a program which is now in its third year of operation. In 1973 we established a foundation to finance the construction of houses and other buildings by our vocational students. As the houses are sold, the funds are returned to the foundation for acquisition of additional sites and the purchase of materials. The foundation is managed by a

group of local business leaders representing the construction industry, architects, real estate brokers, the legal profession, and others. The construction job serves as a laboratory for our classes in the construction trades and also as an alternative program for students who want to spend full time at the construction site. Our largest project at the moment is a conference center for the regional park authority where we are constructing a million dollars worth of dormitories, cafeterias, and other park buildings. A portable classroom has been placed on the site and a teacher provides instruction in the basic skills. The entire construction job as well as training on the job is handled by our vocational education staff and all of the construction is completed by students. This program represents a scratch on the surface of providing alternative programs by utilizing the facilities of the private sector. Retailing experience, office practice, and other work-related experiences are standard in most school districts; however, the potential for developing similar programs is limited only by our imagination and creativity.

Another alternative program which now exists in most school districts is the adult education or continuing education program. Traditionally these programs have been scheduled to begin as soon as the buildings are vacated by the "regular" students. However, we have enjoyed some degree of success in providing alternatives by expanding the program hours, beginning at 8:00 a.m. and closing at 10:30 p.m. Young people, as well as adults, are provided with considerable flexibility permitting them to develop schedules of activities which coincide with other personal needs.

Examples of additional alternative programs which may be implemented with minimal financial impact are:

Internship Programs - Many school districts are providing internship programs in which a high school student is assigned to work with a government official, a law firm, a bank or other enterprise for a period of internship. We have several such programs in Fairfax County and have found them to be most successful. To assist in developing local programs on a planned basis, there is an organization called Executive High School Internships of America, a grant-funded program offering a full range of staff training and technical assistance to local school districts. Under the plan the high school student takes a one-semester sabbatical from school and spends full time as an intern in such places as the Governor's office, an engineering firm, or a local chamber of commerce.

Quincy Senior High School II of Quincy, Illinois, has 1500 11th and 12th grade students who may choose from seven different sub-school programs:

The Traditional School offers the familiar high school curriculum with 55-minute classes and A, B, C grades.

The Flexible School provides a flexible schedule and advisers to work with students in developing varied programs including community involvement, special seminars, and field trips.

A Project to Individualize Education provides independent-study contracts and emphasizes personal growth and understanding.

The Fine Arts School offers an arts-centered curriculum including visual arts, music, drama, broadcasting, and modern dance.

The Career School offers parttime work and on-the-job training.

The Work Study School provides an individualized curriculum for students holding regular jobs or engaged in sheltered work experiences. Low achievers and potential dropouts are helped to develop self concept and group identity.

The Special Education School stresses practical vocational training and independent living skills.

Students in all of these schools are part of Quincy Senior High II and interact with each other in daily living and in all the activities associated with a normal high school. They have their special programs without having to be physically isolated in a separate institution, apart from the general school community.

Milford High School, Milford, Michigan, in conjunction with its regular program, offers three alternative programs as student options:

The "I" Program is a social studies program featuring independent study, project work and community service. Each student spends a minimum of 50 hours in community service. Thirty students enroll in the program for one semester, spending full time in this program and earning two and one-half credits toward graduation. They meet each Monday morning for group activities and to file their individual weekly schedules of at least 25 hours of work. They may complete the work in three days or five.

Senior Option Program is a career exploration program which occupies the student full time for one semester. It features volunteer work in public agencies, educational pursuits in technical schools or colleges and exchange programs.

Individual Studio Art in which students concentrate full time on painting, graphic arts, advertising, interior design or art education. Each student is required to produce a portfolio of work by the end of the program and the program is approved and funded by the Michigan Council of the Arts.

My remarks to this point have targeted on the secondary school programs with the exception of special education. Alternatives in elementary education are equally important; however, I am convinced that a productive and interesting educational experience can be incorporated into our existing elementary organization. In my opinion imaginative and creative teachers and principals can and must provide programs for the academically gifted and talented, the academically unsuccessful, the unmotivated, and the undisciplined. In order to place the major responsibility for meeting the needs of all children on the local school, we are in our fifth year of a program called "Commitment to Education. Based on a Management by Objectives format, the local school now has the responsibility for identifying the needs of all children and developing programs to meet these needs. The programs may call for additional resources or may be funded within existing resources depending on accountability statements and work plans developed by the school staff and the community. Complementing this program is a newly implemented personnel evaluation process called "Evaluation by Objectives." We find that these two activities have forced the local schools to accept more responsibility for the success of their products--the students.

Before citing examples of "Alternative" schools, which are 10
separate and apart from the regular school, let us take a serious

look within. To begin, I would pose the extreme view that well-trained, dedicated teachers in the classroom eliminate the need for alternative programs. We are all aware of those teachers who succeed with all students. Students do not drop out of school because of what they are or are not getting in their classes. These teachers involve the poorest readers in activities that will enhance reading skills and at the same time challenge the academically talented. These teachers have a straight-forward, no-nonsense approach that says to every student, "I am here to help you with something that is worth your while and I know how to do it. So let's get on with it." These teachers devise their own alternatives within their classrooms. If we were blessed with teachers such as these in each of our classrooms, we would not need alternative schools or even alternative programs. All of this suggests the need for emphasis on two areas most often overlooked or at best given a very low priority--teacher inservice and personnel evaluation. In my opinion improved activities in these areas represent the primary solution to the problem of alternative schools.

Since we as educators are apparently not prepared to take a hard-nosed approach to personnel evaluation or to allocating significant resources to teacher upgrading, alternative activities separate and apart from regular or conventional programs appear to be the only salvation for the youngsters.

At one end of the spectrum is a school we call the Sager Avenue School set up as a day school for fifteen young people who are under court probation and in deep trouble at their neighborhood schools.

Attendance is enforced by the probation officers, who would first visit this school to help keep the kids in line. Soon however, through the efforts of an outstanding teacher, these visits are no longer necessary. The teacher and the kids develop a daily schedule with alternate periods of work and play. They select learning and recreational materials including a pin ball machine, and they develop rules for smoking and for living together at school. Learning periods are spent mostly in individual study, but there are group activities for recreation, discussion, films, etc. I am pleased to report to you that most of the younsters are making good progress in the basic academic skills and stay only a few months at the Sager Avenue School. Several other centers in the county represent variations on this theme. They range from private store-front operations to residential training or correctional centers where the School Board provides the instructional program.

Another example of this kind of alternative school is the Robert W. White School in Boston, which is located in the city's mental health center. This school accepts disturbed youngsters into a the therapeutic learning program that permits them to earn a weekly pay check for attending classes and working at various jobs in the school. One 13 year-old learned in two days how to write his own name and endorse his check at the bank.

Let us move from programs which are highly structured and controlled to an activity which is more open-ended. An example which has enjoyed success is the Woodlawn School in Arlington, Virginia.

The students and teachers involve themselves in a process of writing-course proposals and negotiations to determine course content. This teacher-student planning element of the program is perhaps the most significant modification of the school operation. These teacher-student proposals may include vocationally oriented programs, but more likely will have a strong academic focus. Each program is quite narrowly defined, based on a student's interests and abilities, and becomes a contractual arrangement between the teacher and the student or class. It may include "off campus" study, such as involvement with a congressional committee, or a school-contained program with a great deal of independent study. The only limits are the imaginations of the students and teachers.

These are just a few examples of what is being done within the regular secondary schools or in separate centers or in the community itself. There are many others and they have been described in the literature rather extensively over the past few years.

For those who are interested, I have brought with me several copies of a bibliography on alternatives in education, including a listing of ERIC documents on this subject and would be happy for you to pick up a copy before your leave.

Mario Fantini has identified five ground rules which he suggests should be followed in establishing alternative programs in public schools.

First, they must have common sets of objectives so that they are consistent with goals in public education. For example, basic skills,

preparation for societal roles, development of personal identity may be approached by different methods and different programs but the objectives are the same. Fantini points out that alternative public education means diversifying the means to common ends.

Second, the program must be non-exclusive; that is, it must not exclude students on the basis of social, sexual, religious or racial grounds.

Third, each alternative should have equal validity; that is, one program should not make exaggerated claims by belittling another. The relationship between programs and the professionals involved in them must be one of cooperative support.

Fourth, alternatives should be based on individual choice. Alternatives represent a change process and should not be imposed on any parent, teacher or student. The process of change is by attraction, not imposition.

Fifth, each alternative must be willing to be evaluated; both for purposes of its own improvement and for purposes of justifying its continuing existence.

Fantini offers another ground rule which says that alternative education should not depend on increases in per student expenditures but should adapt itself to the going rate for the school district; the idea being to use existing resources more effectively through alternative methods.

You will find Fantini's work listed in my bibliography if you care to pursue it further.

In summary, may I suggest several factors to be considered when the subject of Alternative Programs is raised.

1. Look within! Is the need for alternative programs being generated by the incompetence or misuse of existing personnel?

2. Look within! Can existing activities within the "regular" program be modified to fulfill the unmet needs?

3. Look within! Can the regular program be modified within existing resources?

4. Finally, if all else fails, move cautiously in developing alternative programs apart from the regular program. Consider the need for additional personnel and fiscal support necessary to implement the program. First and foremost, keep in mind the first ground rule identified by Mario Fantini. The program must have common sets of objectives so that they are consistent with the goals of public education. In essence, diversifying the means to common ends.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209

COMMUNICATION ABOUT HALEY'S COMET

A school superintendent told his assistant superintendent the following:

"Next Thursday at 10:30 a.m. Haley's Comet will appear over this area. This is an event which occurs only once every 75 years. Call the school principals and have them assemble their teachers and classes on their athletic fields and explain this phenomenon to them. If it rains then cancel the day's observation and have the classes meet in the auditorium to see a film about the comet."

Assistant superintendent to school principals:

"By order of the superintendent of schools, next Thursday at 10:30 Haley's Comet will appear over your athletic field. If it rains then cancel the day's classes and report to the auditorium with your teachers and students where you will be shown films, a phenomenal event which occurs only once every 75 years."

Principals to teachers:

"By order of the phenomenal superintendent of schools at 10:30 next Thursday Haley's Comet will appear in the auditorium. In case of rain over the athletic field the superintendent will give another order, something which occurs once every 75 years."

Teachers to students:

"Next Thursday at 10:30 the superintendent of schools will appear in our school auditorium with Haley's Comet, something which occurs every 75 years. If it rains the superintendent will cancel the comet and order us all out to our phenomenal athletic field."

Students to parents:

"When it rains next Thursday at 10:30 over the school athletic field the phenomenal 75 year old superintendent of schools will cancel all classes and appear before the whole school in the auditorium accompanied by Bill Haley and the Comets."

...freely adapted from Boles and Associates

"Boles Letter"